

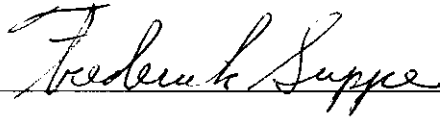
Defining Woman: An Examination of Women's Roles in the Medieval and Early  
Modern Periods

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

Amy J. Gault

Dr. Frederick C. Suppe



---

Dr. Rene S. Marion



---

Ball State University  
Muncie, Indiana

May 2001

May 2001

Thesis  
Topic  
Date  
Page  
1001

638 This paper is an exploration of the expectations that medieval and early modern society held for women. I read and analyzed several primary sources in order to reach my conclusions. I tried to use a variety of sources in order to gain a broader perspective of the expectations late medieval and early modern society held for women. These sources included a set of sermons from Saint Bernardino of Siena, written in 1427; a handbook of advice from an elderly merchant to his young bride, "The Goodman of Paris;" several letters, one from Peter of Blois to Queen Eleanor in 1173 and the "Letters of Direction" written letters between Peter Abelard and his spiritual pupil Eloise; and *The Book of the City of Ladies* written by Christina de Pizan in the early 1400s. I also used Merry Wiesner's *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe* as a secondary source to fill in background information where it was needed. I was able to discover that there was very little difference between the ideals that were expected of religious women versus the set of standards held for their secular counterparts. The main difference was that religious women were held to higher spiritual and moral principles than secular women. Conversely, secular women had more responsibility to household duties such as household management and child-rearing.

Thank you to Dr. Fred Suppe and Dr. Rene Marion, my thesis advisors, for all their help and patience through this thesis process. Without their expertise in the medieval and early modern societies, respectively, I think I would have faltered in my project. Thank you also to my family who supported and encouraged me while I finished my thesis. Thanks especially to Chris, my husband, who took over many of the household duties while I worked feverishly to complete my thesis while nursing a newborn and returning to work full time! I did it, and I'm not crazy yet!

Society's view of women in the Middle Ages and early modern period, approximately the eleventh through seventeenth centuries A.D., was based on tradition stemming from as far back as the classic Greek philosophers and the Church Fathers to contemporary thinkers and poets. Like any subject that has been debated and discussed, there were as many opinions on women's nature and behavioral roles as there were men and women who proposed such ideas. Some writers were scathingly misogynistic in their treatment of women. For example, in *Observations et emendations*, early seventeenth century writer Jacques Cujas writes that "A woman, properly speaking, is not a human being."<sup>1</sup> It appears to have been his belief that women fell between the status of a servant and an animal. Others presented a more glowing perspective, as did Cornelius Agrippa von Nettersheim, a sixteenth century scholar. He states in *De nobilitate et praecellentia sexus foeminei*, "Women then being the last of creatures, the end, complement and consummation of all the works of God, what Ignorance is there so stupid, or what Impudence can there be so effronted, as to deny her a Prerogative above all other Creatures, without whom the World itself had been imperfect."<sup>2</sup> In general, however, this picture painted of a typical woman fit somewhere between these two poles.

In studying the late medieval and early modern periods, we must examine our sources, search for patterns of change over time, and determine whether a significant dichotomy existed between the two main groups of women that were present at that time, secular and religious. The secular orders are easily defined, as they included most women in society from noblewomen to lower-class women who were married, widowed, or would eventually be eligible to be married. Among women in these groups, there were

---

<sup>11</sup> Merry E. Wiesner, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 9.

women who remained single, both by choice and circumstance, who made a living by various means. These women acted as small, unsanctioned merchants or domestics, performing such duties at cooking, sewing, or washing. Far more unusual were women, such as Christine de Pizan and Judith Leyster, who made their livings by writing and painting, respectively.

Many sources were used in the discussion of women's virtues. In addition to the texts of classical and contemporary authors, which are the most obvious media for the discussion, sermons, stories from history and legend, and laws, particularly Roman law, shaped late medieval and early modern society's view of women. Many of these laws pertained to a woman's rights to inheritance, and her ability to own or manage property, and to appear in court as witness or on her own behalf. These laws set certain limits on women's activities in the medieval period. For example, any unmarried woman had to have a male guardian to manage her inheritance or property and to represent her during a court proceeding. As more kingdoms aligned their legal code with the Roman code of law and as the feudal system disintegrated, unmarried women and widows gained the ability to represent themselves, although they would lose this legal capacity again in the early modern period. All women were excluded from the ability to hold public office, based upon the reasoning that all women were either married or were to become married. Married women were, as a result, dependent on and subordinate to their husbands, while holding a public office might cause them to act independently of their husbands' wishes, leading to disobedience. The married woman could neither sue or make contracts without her husband's approval, nor could she be sued or charged with a civil crime. So while women were limited by the legal system and excluded from much participation in

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

it, they were also protected by it. One legal protection a woman had was a marriage contract, which allowed a woman to retain legal control of her dowry and often gave her certain inheritance rights. These inheritance rights allowed her to retain a certain amount of her deceased husband's property until her death, which then reverted back to his heirs.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the portrait of women we get from other sources is reflected in the laws of the society and can be seen in women's exclusion from and inclusion in other aspects of the legal system. Women had to live up to certain standards yet they were not given legal rights consistent with those expectations.

The concept of sexual honor, which helped shape society's view of women, was often separate from the legal system. Although the laws respected women's ability to use the courts, middle- and upper-class ladies typically depended upon the males in their family to defend their honor rather than the courts. Sexual honor mainly involved maintaining chastity both before and after marriage. One remained chaste by keeping one's virginity until marriage and remaining loyal to one's husband until his death. Women who had been "violated" were allowed to accuse men of insulting their honor in court because a woman who had been raped was viewed as "tainted" or "shamed," making her unmarriageable. An unmarried woman would remain a financial burden to her father or brothers, when she could have been married off and supported by her husband. The idea of cloistering women is directly related to the idea of sexual honor. A woman who was kept secluded, or in some cases excluded, from the outside world was less likely to provide a temptation for a rapist. All women were cloistered to some extent, regardless of the terminology used in the particular case of each group.

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., note: the material pertaining to laws can be found in greater detail in Wiesner, Chapter 1, pp. 30-35.

Women who professed religious vows were, of course, kept cloistered behind the convent walls, having very little contact with the outside world. Women who did not profess religious vows, yet remained celibate, had a different experience from both professed religious women and secular women, since many lived in a religious community but were not required to remain in cloister. Even a secular woman's mobility was circumscribed since it was her duty to stay at home to run the household and raise the children. However, greater freedom apparently existed among lower-class women, who were, for example, allowed to sell goods in the markets. These women were often allowed to make goods such as embroideries and to sell them in order to support themselves. Legal and ecclesiastical authorities saw this work as an acceptable alternative to relying on charity to support such poor women and their families or to relegating them to a poorhouse. These women were restricted, however, in the type and amount of work they might be allowed to do. For example, guilds almost unanimously denied women membership, effectively limiting working women to trades that had no associated guild or union.<sup>4</sup> In these ways, women were kept "cloistered" to protect their sexual honor and to keep them from falling into sin and temptation.

Beyond general expectations as a whole, it is important to keep in mind that among these different groups of women, a woman's role in society and the expectations concerning her behavior also varied. There were specific expectations related to the group in question as well as its role in society. For secular women, family, church, and society as well as the legal system shaped expectations governing women. To act in a way pleasing to God, religious women faced pressure from canon law, society's moral code, and the "rules," the formal guide to a given religious order's beliefs and customs,.

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 31-2.

Even among the women who were on the edge of society, such as those who needed to work in order to support themselves and their families, society expected certain patterns of behavior. Secular women, as we have discussed, form the largest group of women. As a result, an exploration of secular women will provide a closer look at expectations for women in general and the specific expectations of wives and affianced women. I tried to use a variety of sources to provide examples of the types of literature about, or directed toward, women and the different segments of the population of medieval and early modern women.

Works of educated writers throughout the centuries contain many references to women, their desired behavior, and their general nature. The overarching theme is that women are inferior, and they should be protected from themselves and others. Until the Renaissance, the idea that women might *not* be inferior to men was very rare. The radical changes in thinking brought about by the Renaissance gave rise to new, albeit highly contested, ideas about women. Changing ideas were not always accompanied by positive changes, as the laws regarding women often became stricter rather than looser. Existing views about women were challenged, but even these opinions were still based largely upon traditions dating back many centuries.<sup>5</sup>

#### **BIBLICAL PRECEDENT AND MEDIEVAL LEGACY**

A key foundation in shaping the views of women and expectations concerning their behavior was the Holy Scriptures of the Jews and Christians, the Old Testament. The creation stories found in the book of Genesis portray women as inferior; Eve was created out of Adam's rib, thus placing her in an inferior position, as popular thought had it. Later, Eve was the first person to sin, making all her progeny, women, incurably evil,



in fact the source of all the evil in the world. In the Old Testament, there are specific examples of an ideal woman contained in the book of Proverbs. These examples became the basis for the behavior of Jewish women as well as Christian women.<sup>6</sup> In one proverb in particular, a father advises his son about what to look for in a wife.

When one finds a worthy wife, her value is far beyond pearls. Her husband, entrusting his heart to her, has an unfailing prize. She brings him good, and not evil, all the days of her life. She obtains wool and flax and makes cloth with skillful hands. Like merchant ships, she secures her provisions from afar. She rises while it is still night, and distributes food to her household. She picks out a field to purchase; out of her earnings, she plants a vineyard. She is girt about with strength, and sturdy are her arms. She enjoys the success of her dealings; at night her lamp is undimmed. She puts her hands to the distaff, and her fingers ply the spindle. She reaches out her hands to the poor, and extends her arms to the needy. She fears not the snow for her household; all her charges are doubly clothed. She makes her own coverlets; fine linen and purple are her clothing. Her husband is prominent at the city gates as he sits with the elders of the land. She makes garments and sells them, and stocks the merchants with belts. She is clothed with strength and dignity, and she laughs at the days to come. She opens her mouth in wisdom, and on her tongue is kindly counsel. She watches the conduct of her household, and eats not her food in idleness. Her children rise up and praise her; her husband, too, extols her: "Many are the women of proven worth, but you have excelled them all." Charm is deceptive and beauty fleeting; the woman who fears the Lord is to be praised. Give her a reward of her labors, and let her works praise her at the city gates.<sup>7</sup>

This proverb describes the expected duties of a good wife. She was industrious in her housework, as her family's attire plainly demonstrated. Piety and charitable works were another of the good wife's hallmarks. In the proverb, she was responsible for her family's financial well-being while her husband studied at the city gates. However, most late medieval and early modern women were not expected to provide for their families, unless they were widowed. Although she was not responsible for her family's livelihood,

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 11.

a good wife of the Middle Ages was valuable to her family's financial well-being by being thrifty and also giving the excess cloth or clothing she made to her husband to sell in the market.

These ideals carried through the ages, changing as the situation required, and continued to be the standard for how all wives should behave. We can see their legacy in "The Goodman of Paris." Written between 1392 and 1394, "The Goodman of Paris" is a letter which illustrates an elderly Parisian merchant's ideal of marriage and the behavior he expected of his new wife. In the greeting, the author describes that his new wife requested some instruction on how to be a good wife to him and asked him to consider her youth and inexperience while she is still learning her role and the expectations it entails. The young wife may have in fact requested this instruction, but the greeting clearly indicates that a young wife was to seek advice from her husband so that she would be able to please him in all ways. One of the Goodman's first pieces of advice to his bride is to follow the example of her relatives and other women of similar rank; however, he also gives her permission to deviate from that advice if she feels that she has a better way to accomplish the same goal. His goal, he writes, is to facilitate her quest to become a good wife who will bring honor and praise to her family, her husband, and herself. She should, we see, take her husband's advice, as well as that of others, so that she might earn the respect of society by conforming to its expectations of her.

The body of "The Goodman of Paris" contains three sections with nineteen articles with more specific advice to his wife on how she should behave. His first section concerns "the salvation of your soul and the comfort of your husband" since they are "the

---

<sup>7</sup> Proverbs 31:10-31, *New American Bible*, Saint Joseph MEDIUM SIZE Edition. (New York: Catholic Book Publishing, 1970), 733.

two things most chiefly necessary". The first section's fifth article states, for example, that the wife should love and show preference to her husband over any living creature. She should show love and moderate partiality toward both her relatives and her husband's relatives. She should avoid all other men, but most particularly "overweening and idle young men" and those men and women who are known to lead an easy, loose life.<sup>8</sup> As an example of how a wife should show preference for her husband, the merchant describes in the natural order how among wild and domestic animals, the female partners follow their mates and do not pursue other males of that species. The example of how dogs are loyal to their masters is another example in that section. Yet another illustration is the story of a dog named Macaire who stayed with his master after his (the master's) death and even attacked his master's murderer. One may get the sense that perhaps a woman is being compared to a dog. It becomes apparent, however, that more is expected of a wife. "[F]or a better and stronger reason women, to whom God has given natural sense and who are reasonable, ought to have a perfect and solemn love for their husband."<sup>9</sup>

In the sixth article found in the first section, the merchant discusses obedience and humility of the wife toward her husband. In essence, the wife should obey her husband, putting his needs above her own. If a situation arises that requires a decision on the part of the wife in the husband's absence, she should always act in accordance to *his* wishes. To coincide with his mandate of obedience, a wife should never do what he forbids and never talk back or otherwise oppose him publicly. At the end of the sixth article, he discusses the Scriptural reasoning behind this section. "That is to say, it is the command

---

<sup>8</sup> *The Internet Medieval Sourcebook*, "The Goodman of Paris 1392/4."  
<<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/goodman.html>> (3 March 2000).

of God that wives be subject to their husbands as their lords, for the husband is the head of the wife, even as our Lord Jesus Christ is the head of the Church.”<sup>10</sup> As we can see, even in this secular document, biblical precedent is key in exemplifying how the Goodman’s wife should act.

The seventh article discusses at length how to keep a husband content and happy. The Goodman first outlines his rationale behind why a woman should keep her husband happy and healthy. He reasons that a second husband, if the wife chose to remarry after her first husband’s death, may not be as likable as the first, so the wife should always do everything in her power to keep the first husband happy, comfortable, and *healthy*. His description of the “comforts of home” include putting his feet up before the fire, having them washed, being served, going to bed in fresh white sheets and clean nightclothes, warmly covered, and “assuaged with other joys and desports, privities, loves and secrets whereof I am silent. And the next day fresh shirts and garments.” According to the merchant, such amenities make a man desire to return to his home at the end of the day, rather than seeking the comfort of a strange woman or prostitute. He recounts to his bride a folk saying “that there be three things which drive the Goodman from home, to wit a leaking roof, a smoky chimney and a scolding woman.” However, a woman who maintains the comforts of home should never have to worry about her husband leaving her for the company of another because he will become “bewitched” by her instead of another woman. The Goodman explains that it is not a magic spell that causes men to

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

become bewitched; rather it is the comfort and joys that women, preferably their wives, show to them that make them unable to resist these women's charms.<sup>11</sup>

Following the discourse on bewitching and enchantment of a husband, the merchant gives his bride practical advice on maintaining the comforts of home so that she can attract her husband and keep him coming back to her. This advice includes advice on how to rid a room of fleas during the summer and many various ways to remove an infestation of flies from a home. At the end of the article is a warning against things that can cause a marriage to sour. One such scenario results from a lack of communication, love, and mutual respect between the husband and wife. Another example is tricking the husband into relaxing control over the wife so that she gains dominion over him, corrupting the "natural order" of things.<sup>12</sup> These expectations are rooted in that single Proverb, which is essentially the summation of all that the Holy Scriptures say about women, their role in society, and their expected behavior.

In other places in the Old Testament, women played important roles in saving the Israelites' way of life, such as Queen Esther and Judith. However, after the particular emergency had passed, for example the near extinction of the Jews by King Artaxerxes, these heroines all returned to their normal domestic lives, as was expected.<sup>13</sup> The Goodman's advice parallels these occurrences in the Old Testament by telling his wife that she may attend to his business if he is unable to tend to it, as long as she acts in the best interests of his business. This "freedom" is, of course, restricted by the understanding that he will regain control over the situation as soon as he is able, which maintains the male hierarchy.

---

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

In the early Christian church, women were given a liberal amount of freedom, following Jesus of Nazareth's lead in accepting women's abilities to understand his teachings, among other fairly radical ideas. Gradually, women were restricted more and more as the members of the church tried to make Christianity less threatening to Romans, modeling the hierarchy and canon law upon Roman hierarchy, law, and customs. It was at this time that the first vehemently misogynistic writers published their thoughts on women's evil nature. Not only was Eve's sin in the Garden of Eden remembered, women's sexual attractiveness to men was identified as sinful, causing many men to sin and fall short of the ideals held for them. This philosophy of women's sinful nature, combined with Aristotelian ideas that women were merely "imperfect men," provided the basis for most ideas about women for centuries.<sup>14</sup>

#### **MEDIEVAL SHIFTS IN THINKING ABOUT WOMEN**

Scholasticism in the eleventh to thirteenth centuries, the High Middle Ages, only served to reinforce these negative ideas about women. Thomas Aquinas is the most famous scholastic, and he proposed that not only were women inferior from the dawn of creation, they were also inherently inferior because of Eve. According to Aquinas and other scholastics, women's inferiority was evident in their physical and intellectual weakness, although women were completely responsible for their own salvation. Although women were not viewed to be full of virtue, ironically, devotion to and veneration of the Virgin Mary had gained greater emphasis among western Christians by the twelfth century. As the Virgin Mary's importance grew, theologians and philosophers began to see her as the opposite of Eve, the source of goodness and purity.

---

<sup>13</sup> Wiesner, 11.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 12-13.

This new line of thinking created a dichotomy of good versus evil between Mary and Eve. While the effects of Marian theology on women of the time do not seem to be that great, she became a role model for women.<sup>15</sup>

Reaching far beyond the realm of volumes dedicated to the specific topic of women's virtues and vices, the discussion about women carried over into prints, pamphlets, letters, sermons, and many philosophical and theological works that were on subjects completely unrelated. For example, earlier in the Middle Ages, Peter of Blois wrote a letter to Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine when she was successfully leading a revolt against her husband King Henry II, around 1173 A.D. After the greetings, Peter makes a firm statement about matrimony's eternal qualities. The letter is a definite response to Eleanor's "disobedience" to her husband by leading a revolt against him. In fact, he continues later to say that the simple fact that she has left Henry is a denial of the marriage vows and a violation of the indissoluble nature of marriage, as well as defying the expectations held for all women.<sup>16</sup> Her behavior countered every expectation that society held for her, and is also contrary to the good wife described in Proverbs.

As the Middle Ages progressed, the rise of the art of the courtier began to create a shift in society's attitude toward women. Literature of courtly love focused on respect for and honor of women, and the women who were the subjects of such literature were always portrayed as being full of virtue and purity. Although women became the subjects of such literature, rather than military feats and legends, women still held passive roles in the plots and men were the active figures. In other words, although women were the main characters, they sometimes played the role of damsels in distress; or more often,

---

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 14.

they stayed at home while the men went off to perform heroic acts on their behalf.

Toward the end of the Middle Ages, however, the clerics' pessimistic view of women had also invaded literature and popular culture with tales of women who would only obey their husbands when they were beaten. Positive stereotypes of women also existed, however, as examples of how women should act. For example, the legend of Griselda is one of those tales that serves as a good role model for women.<sup>17</sup> In this legend, Griselda is a peasant woman who catches her prince's eye and is married to him. She is taken to the castle where she eventually becomes queen and fulfills her wifely duties to the king's great pleasure. She becomes pregnant, and after the child's birth, a daughter, the king decides to test her by saying that the people want the child killed, since she is born of a peasant mother. Griselda submits to her husband's request, but he sends his daughter to live with his sister instead of having her killed. A few years later, this happens again with their son. In time, he told Griselda that he wanted a divorce, to which Griselda again acquiesced. As a final test of her loyalty and humility, he requested that she return to the castle to help prepare for his new bride's arrival. When the supposed wedding party arrived, he announced that the young lady and her brother were not his new wife and brother-in-law, rather they were the long-lost son and daughter. He stated that this was a test of Griselda to see if she was married to him for love or for his money. This legend was designed to encourage women to be humble, kind, generous, and obedient so that they might gain the rewards that Griselda gained – a good reputation, the love and affection of her husband and children, and the esteem of the community.

---

<sup>16</sup> *Internet Medieval Sourcebook*, "Peter of Blois: Letter 154 to Queen Eleanor, 1173." <<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/Eleanor.html>> (3 March 2000).

<sup>17</sup> Wiesner, 14-15.



## RENAISSANCE DEBATES OVER WOMEN

The Renaissance brought about renewed debate over women's virtues, natures, and their value in society. The first work of literature to recognize women for their loyalty, bravery, intelligence, and virtue, *De mulieribus claris*, was written in approximately 1380 by Giovanni Boccaccio. In this work, Boccaccio describes famous women from classical history who performed exemplary deeds of virtue, constancy, and courage. Many other writers throughout the early modern period, such as Christine de Pizan and Cornelius Agrippa of Nettesheim, followed Boccaccio's example in their own works and added Biblical characters, holy Christian women, and famous contemporary women. In their descriptions of the highest of human virtues, even such proponents of women as spiritual equals as Desiderius Erasmus, Juan Luis Vives, and Thomas Elyot were impressed by these other authors' examples of women, since they praised women for chastity, obedience, and holiness while simultaneously commending men for good judgment, bravery, and influence.<sup>18</sup>

Although there were many humanists who wrote against women, there were also humanists who wrote favorably of women, Cornelius Agrippa, for example. In fact, many humanist writers published defenses of the character of women. However, quite a few of these same authors also composed attacks on women's characters or made sure that both arguments, positive and negative, were included in the work. With this information, many historians, including Merry Wiesner, believe that the debate of women's virtues was a great intellectual and literary exercise and may not reflect the true ideas of society's views on women. Some attacks are so shocking that many scholars feel that their only possible context could have been as a joke. While the topic of women's

expected behavior may have been a rhetorical study, these scathing works appear to have gained some popularity among the lesser-educated individuals in society as well. By mid-sixteenth century, translations of Latin works were becoming popular and the debate of the virtues of women had managed to become a pamphlet topic as well.<sup>19</sup> It can even be argued that this debate continues even in the modern world with equal rights laws in many Western countries encompassing both the rights of ethnic minorities and women.

In order to educate the general public, ecclesiastical officials often relied on sermons, since they were the most effective way to reach the illiterate or poorly educated majority of late medieval and early modern society. This method of teaching and indoctrination was particularly effective before the rise of the printing press, as it was one of the only ways to get information and opinions to society. One such example of sermons comes from a set of the many of St. Bernardino of Siena's sermons that were set down to paper by Benedetto di Maestro Bartolomeo, a cloth cutter and citizen of Bernardino's hometown. These sermons were given sometime during the late summer of 1427 in Siena's public square. They were directed toward women, voicing some of the Church and society's expectations of wives, mothers, and unmarried women. In one sermon, Bernardino speaks of the three foundations of marriage – "Profit, Pleasure, and Honesty or Virtue."

In this sermon, Bernardino gives advice to women about marriage. It is his belief that a woman should not take a husband who is only interested in the size of her dowry. Instead, she should focus on the "dowry" of her virtue, which has a value that can never be spent or decreased once it has been established. He also argues that if both parties

---

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 17-20.

have virtue, then it is possible for “true friendship to reign” between spouses. From the transcripts of his sermons, it appears that he values women as the ones who keep families together. Before he begins his discourse on the foundations of marriage, he states that matrimony was “ordained that the one might aid the other in keeping the burden straight. And mark me, women, that I hold with you so far as to say that you love your husbands better than they love you.”<sup>20</sup>

In his dialogue on Profit, or the value of both spouses as a foundation of a good marriage, he gives several reasons why a woman is worthy of praise and respect. His opinion is that since women are made of bone, not clay, they are physically cleaner than men. On the other hand, he also reprimands women for being too noisy during Mass, stating that they rattle on like the bones from which they are made. He also reminds his listeners that Solomon said the man who has a good wife possesses a great wealth that goes beyond material gain. Bernardino’s discussion of the benefits of taking a wife versus keeping a mistress are important because the duties that he mentions give us an idea of what was expected of a typical wife. The duties of a good housewife include keeping the granary free from dirtiness; maintaining the supply of foodstuffs, including oil, meat, and wine; spinning, weaving, and sewing; and keeping the house and its belongings clean, among other things. An important part of a woman’s duties was household management, and as we can see from the short list of duties he gave as an example, that responsibility was very detailed and involved. Earlier in the sermon, he admonished men to help their wives with raising the children, stating that “...she travails in childbirth, travails to suckle the child, travails to rear it, travails in washing and

---

<sup>20</sup> *The Internet Medieval Sourcebook*, “Bernardino of Siena: Two Sermons on Wives and Widows.” <<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/bernardino-2sermons.html>> (3 March 2000).

cleaning by day and by night.”<sup>21</sup> While Bernardino may have viewed women a little more favorably than most of his contemporaries, it is important to look at the underlying assumptions in his sermon. Those assumptions are that the wife should be obedient to her husband, thrifty, trustworthy, and a pious example to the children. His examples of good household management give modern historians an important glimpse into the mindset of late medieval and early modern society.

Many of the expectations that society placed upon secular women were also required of religious women, who also lived under additional expectations from the church. Sexual honor and purity were even more at stake for religious women, as the survival of the community depended on the reputation of the convent and its inhabitants. In fact, the vows the sisters of most convents took were “continence” (chastity, or sexual purity), “lack of personal possessions” (poverty and humility), and the observation of silence. This emphasis on sexual honor gave rise to cloistering and the institution of strict regulations governing contact between the convent’s abbess and the abbot of the adjoining monastery, or any other man, for that matter. For example, in the “Letters of Direction,” written in the middle of the twelfth century, Peter Abelard, who was Heloise’s spiritual mentor and former lover, brings up the Council of Seville’s recommendation that convents be administered by monasteries and by “precautions” necessary to maintain purity and holiness. The abbot was not supposed to speak to the convent’s superior in private, for example, unless two or three sisters were present. Monks and celibate women were discouraged from becoming “familiar” with one another, both in the sexual and emotional sense, as such closeness between monks and sisters was against both canon law and the Rule which the order followed. In many ways,

---

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

the relationship between these “mutual monasteries” mirrored a marital relationship. The sisters were required to always be busy from morning until night, stopping only for the Liturgy of the Hours, Mass, and meals; they made clothing for the monks, washed, baked, milked, looked after the livestock, and performed other “household” duties in exchange for the monks’ services. Those “services” mainly involved protecting the convent and performing tasks such as carpentry, masonry, and other labor intensive duties.<sup>22</sup>

To help the convent run more smoothly, there were certain offices, whose officers were responsible for different aspects of running the convent. Abelard prescribed these duties in the rule he made for Heloise’s convent, which followed the Rules of Benedict and Basil rather loosely. The Abbess’s responsibilities, of course, were all-encompassing, focusing on both the material and spiritual welfare of the convent. She had supreme authority, and even the abbot could not challenge her, unless her decisions had the potential to harm to the convent’s spiritual life. She was a mother figure, who was, ideally, a pious widow with experience raising children and running a household. Her Sacristan managed everything in relation to the chapel. Her duties were to clean the altar linens, keep the Oratory supplies well-stocked, oversee the preparation of the hosts, and keep track of the phases of the moon to make sure the Oratory had supplies for the right season.

The Chantress served as a librarian or teacher, and it was crucial that she be knowledgeable in music and literate as well. She taught singing, reading, and writing to the sisters, and encouraged any sister who showed promise in letters to continue to pursue her education. In this way, she fulfilled the expectation of woman as a teacher, although

---

<sup>22</sup> *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise* (New York: Penguin Books, 1974), 211-213.

she was teaching other women rather than children. The Chantress maintained the book cupboard, handling the books and repairing or copying them if the need arose. In addition, she took care of the choir, making seating charts and assigning cantors, and organizing the daily Office of the Hours. Her final duty was to make up the lists of duties for the convent each Saturday. Another important officer, the Infirmarian, oversaw taking care of the sick, dying, and menstruating women. Her job was much easier if she had some sort of knowledge about medicine, so she likely had some sort of training in the uses of herbs, wound care, and bloodletting. In caring for her wards, she acted like a mother does toward her own sick children.

The Wardrober's duties were divided into two different types. Most importantly, she was responsible for ensuring that everyone in the convent and monastery was clothed and had shoes. Her involvement started with shearing the sheep and spinning the raw materials into thread or tanning hides into leather. From there, she made bedding for the dormitories, tablecloths, towels, and also washed them when they were dirty. She assigned various sewing duties to the other sisters because everyone in the convent was equipped with scissors, thread, and a needle. Her second duty was to watch over and teach the novices until they were admitted into the community. While the Wardrober provided for the external physical needs of the community, the Cellaress took care of the community's internal physical needs. Her responsibility was to take care of the food, from growing and harvesting it to cooking and serving the finished products to the community. The areas of the convent under her supervision included the cellar, kitchen, refectory, mill, bakery, gardens, woods, fields, and barnyard. These two roles are the

closest to those that secular women filled. They were the “household management” aspect of convent life.

The Portress was the convent’s single direct contact with the outside world, giving hospitality to those who needed it – travelers and impoverished persons. She received the guests and took them to their proper places. While the other duties were very important for the smooth operation of the convent, the Portress’s duty was vitally important to the reputation of the convent, as she was the one person the outside world saw. It was vital for her to be “gentle of speech and mild in manner” in her contact with the outside. Although the convent was a contemplative one which maintained silence nearly always, the Portress was called to an even higher standard of silence, so that passersby would not think that the convent’s inhabitants ignored their vow of silence.<sup>23</sup> As we have seen from the various descriptions of the duties that the sisters performed, their daily tasks were equivalent to those their secular counterparts also executed. In addition, they were held to a higher spiritual standard, maintaining silence and praying rather than talking. They were also given more freedom to follow academic pursuits, though not to the same extent that the monks were. It appears that the same standards that secular women followed were also important for religious women to abide by, the only difference in these values being the higher spiritual expectations for religious women.

Educated secular women were much more rare than educated religious women. Among the educated secular women of the Renaissance, humanist Christine de Pizan is the first and arguably most famous female participant in this intellectual discussion about women. She provides a unique perspective because of her femininity. The first part of

one of her most famous works, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, which was written in the first decade of the 1400s, explores why such misogynistic views existed toward women. Through her examples of virtuous women in the rest of the text, she suggests that the misogynists were men who likely extrapolated their own limitations and reservations onto others, particularly women. In her introduction of *The Book of the City of Ladies*, Pizan argues that although educated men have written numerous treatises against women, she knew many women who acted very differently from the “typical” woman portrayed by these men. Her premise is that many men, from classical philosophers to her contemporaries, portrayed women as being full of vices. In contrast, she provides many examples of pure, noble, intelligent, talented women, but does not claim equality between women and men. Rather, she argues women’s inferiority to men is due to a disadvantage in comparison to men, not some biological or inherent reason. The intention of this book was not a call for social change, but it gave women, at least educated ones, some hope for an eventual change in society’s attitude toward them, allowing them the freedom to contribute to society by more than just rearing children and caring for a family.<sup>24</sup>

In the introduction, she voices frustration at the injustice of men’s judgments of women, in a lament to God. “If it is so, fair Lord God, that in fact so many abominations abound in the female sex, for You Yourself say that the testimony of two or three witnesses lends credence, why shall I not doubt that this is true? Alas, God, why did You not let me be born in the world as a man, so that...I would not stray in anything and would be as perfect as a man is said to be?”<sup>25</sup> Subsequently she argues that these same philosophers and Doctors of the Church also argue against one another’s philosophies,

---

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 213-218.

<sup>24</sup> Wiesner, 16.



rendering their arguments against women less effective. Men, she concludes, write against women out of fear, ignorance, or mean-spiritedness.<sup>26</sup>

The rest of *The Book of the City of Ladies* uses many examples of famous women to disprove the theory that women were evil. In her examples, she recounts stories in the lives of ladies such as Fredegund, Queen of France, who ruled the kingdom of France until the male heir was able to govern the land himself.<sup>27</sup> Other examples come from history, legend, saints' lives, and include courageous, loyal, just, strong, and pure women. Each example refutes the argument that women are in some way inferior, and each provides a positive example for all women to follow. While many of these examples reinforce society's ideas on the role of women, especially those of good wives and mothers, such as Griselda, who performed the duties that we have already discussed in this paper, several also challenge social norms. For example, in the sections where she discusses loyalty and bravery, her outspoken praise of courageous women like the mythical Amazons may have alarmed several among her contemporaries who thought that women did not have the capacity to act in such a commendable manner. Following with the ideas of her time and society, Pizan identifies the Virgin Mary as the essential model for women. The most important section for advice occurs in the last few paragraphs of the work.<sup>28</sup> Pizan tells the ladies how they should always act to make sure that no man can criticize them. She tells women to "make liars of them all by showing

---

<sup>25</sup> Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies* (New York: Persea Books, 1982), 5.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 18-20.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 254-257.

forth your virtue, and prove their attacks false by acting well, so that you can say with the Psalmist, 'the vices of the evil will fall on their heads.'"<sup>29</sup>

In conclusion, it seems safe to say that even among the more revolutionary writers, Christine de Pizan in particular, society's perception of a woman, her duties, and her behavior still fell into a certain mindset. In this outlook, women were expected to obey husbands, raise children, manage a household and its servants, and behave with modesty and humility. These expectations appear to be static from the Middle Ages through the early modern period and implicitly state that a woman should be able to run a household, or at least perform household duties. She should be modest, chaste, and otherwise pure. She should follow both the Proverb that describes a good wife and the Virgin Mary, at least until the start of the Protestant Reformation, so as not to give anyone a reason to promote bad ideas about women's characters. All contemporary thought on women, from both secular and religious sources, seemed to be directly influenced by the Bible, tradition, and previous philosophers. Contemporaries defined women's roles as mothers and wives because they were generally only allowed to perform tasks within those specific areas of everyday life, such as the home and the spiritual realm. Even convents ran along a modified model of a household, each woman sharing in the same activities she would have performed as a wife or mother. Although there was some room for women outside of the convents to deviate from expected activities, society expected them to return to their normal roles as soon as the situation allowed it, maintaining the hierarchy of men.

---

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 256.

## Works Cited

### Primary Sources

*The Internet Medieval Sourcebook*, "Bernardino of Siena: Two Sermons on Wives and Widows." n.d. <<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/bernardino-2sermons.html>> (3 March 2000).

*The Internet Medieval Sourcebook*, "The Goodman of Paris 1392/4." n.d. <<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/goodman.html>> (3 March 2000).

*The Internet Medieval Sourcebook*, "Peter of Blois: Letter 154 to Queen Eleanor, 1173." n.d. <<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/Eleanor.html>> (3 March 2000).

*The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*. New York: Penguin Books, 1974.

*New American Bible*. Saint Joseph Medium Size Edition. New York: Catholic Book Publishing, 1970.

Pizan, Christina de. *The Book of the City of Ladies*. New York: Persea Books, 1982.

### Secondary Sources

Wiesner, Merry E. *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993.